

“Not So Minor Prophets: 4) Jonah”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

June 27, 2010

**Text: “Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’”
(Jonah 4:10-11)**

Over the past weeks we have looked again at what is for many an unfamiliar part of the Old Testament, the 12 books that are referred to as the “Minor Prophets.” Over the past three weeks we have examined the books of Amos, Hosea, and Habakkuk.

One of the characteristics that the prophets share is that the books that bear their names are a collection of sayings or oracles that were spoken by the prophet.

The book of Jonah, which is the subject of the sermon today, is an exception to this rule. It is not a collection of sayings by a prophet, but a narrative about a prophet.

The book of Jonah has sometimes been characterized as a “novella” – a brief novel. The message is closely tied with the narrative of Jonah. Like any good novel, it contains a series of character developments, subplots, and a host of other literary devices. It also contains legends about the prophet, fable, satire, allegory, and not a small amount of humor.

The Book of Jonah derives its name from that of a prophet who lived in the 8th Century B.C. and was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. However, there is a great deal of evidence that this story fits more clearly in a much later time of Israel’s history.

I.

The story of Jonah begins with the word of God that comes to Jonah, son of Amittai, calling the prophet to go to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, an empire that was a great enemy of Israel.

Jonah was a reluctant prophet. He did not want to go to Nineveh. So, instead of going east to Nineveh he decided to go to Tarshish, and headed to the port of Joppa to take a ship. Jonah was essentially trying to flee the presence of God and believed that if he could escape from the land of Israel, he could escape the God of Israel.

So Jonah set sail for Tarshish. But a great storm arose at sea and the sailors were frightened that they would all perish. When Jonah confessed that he was escaping the God of Israel and that he was the cause of the storm at sea, the sailors had no choice but to throw Jonah overboard.

This, however, was not the end of the story. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish (whale) and then after three days, is thrown up by the fish on the land.

So, for a second time the Lord commands Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, and this time he heads directly to Nineveh. (Jonah 3:1) Jonah announces, as God had commanded him, that in forty days the city will be destroyed.

Then, something very strange happens. The people of Nineveh repent, turn away from their evil ways, and turn to God. When God saw their true repentance, God changed his mind and decided not to destroy the great city.

Jonah, instead of rejoicing at this good news, was angry. After all, God had told him to announce to the Ninevites the destruction of their city. When God failed to do what Jonah had prophesied, Jonah was upset.

The narrator tells us that Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city where he sulked over his disappointment with God. Then, we read, God caused a bush to grow over Jonah's head in order to give the prophet shade. But when the bush was destroyed by God, Jonah was irate. Again, he complained bitterly to God.

God chides Jonah, who is upset over the loss of a bush and the shade it brought, but could not work up any sympathy for a great city of 120,000 people.

II.

Now, there are several things that must be said about this reluctant prophet and the book that bears his name.

The first is that this book is not historical, not in the strictest sense of that word. One of the most obvious evidences of this is the "great fish" or whale that has occupied a great deal of

discussion on this book. Many people struggle to understand how a person could remain alive in the belly of a whale for three days.

But, there is more. The prophet Jonah, to whom this story refers, lived in the 8th Century B.C. The narrative of the prophet reflects a much later period in Israel's history.

Moreover, there are other details of the story that strain the credibility of the narrative. The story describes the city of Nineveh as so large that it would take a person three days to walk its breadth. There is no archaeological evidence to confirm this. Moreover, had a great city such as Nineveh turned against its evil ways and had turned to the God of Israel, it is very likely that this would have been an amazing story that surely would have been preserved somewhere in the annals of the Assyrian Empire or the Old Testament, neither of which mention this event.

The second thing that needs be said about this book is that it represents a radical affirmation of the love of God, not just for his chosen people, but for all the people of the world. The Assyrians were a hated people. That is why Jonah did not want to go there to prophesy. Furthermore, Jonah was terribly irritated when God repented of his decision to destroy the city.

The contrast between the prophet Jonah and God could not be more sharply drawn. The God of the book of Jonah is a God who loves all people – including the hated Ninevites. There is a universal aspect to God's love. That is the reason that many people have observed that the Book of Jonah is the one book in the Old Testament that is closest to the New Testament.

III.

Certainly, that is consistent with the message of Jesus. He preached the love of God for all people. Many of the parables of the New Testament underscore this point. The Parable of the Prodigal Son affirms the love of God for a wayward child. The Good Samaritan parable extends the love of God to the outsiders of Jesus' day – in this case not the hated Assyrians but the hated Samaritans. On another occasion Jesus told a parable about a group of laborers in the vineyard. (Matthew 20:1-16) In this case the master of the vineyard hired a group of workers to serve in the vineyard. Some worked the entire day; others only an hour. But at the end of the day the master paid all of them the same wage. And when those who had worked for the entire day complained, the master replied with a similar response as God response to Jonah, "Am I not allowed to do what I chose with what belongs to me?" (Matthew 20:15)

Some years ago J. B. Phillips published a book he entitled *Your God is Too Small* in which he made the point that the God that is often portrayed in the church is so much smaller than the God one finds in the New Testament. So often the God we worship is little more than a pale reflection of our interests, our little circle of friends, and our version of morality. David Miller, who is a long time friend of mine and who, along with his wife Polly, spent four decades as missionaries in Central Africa, once told me that when he worshipped in this country, he always listened carefully to try to understand what God was being worshipped in a particular church. Was it simply the God of a small group of people or was it a God that loved the entire world?

The New Testament confronts us with the picture of Jesus that is anything put small: reaching out to touch lepers; gathering about him the blind, lame, and the halt; telling a parable

about a Good Samaritan; eating with tax collectors and sinners, including the hated tax collector Zaccheus.

Reinhold Niebuhr once preached a sermon to a group of seminary students that he entitled “The Dangers and Hazards of the Christian Ministry.” In that sermon he spoke of what he called “the practical difficulty of preaching the gospel,” in which he meant that the gospel is often most relevant to those who believe it is least relevant. Niebuhr noted that it was particularly difficult to preach to people who were powerful, wealthy, and the well-educated. The reason for that is that these people are generally secure in their knowledge, wealth, and power. These people often do not understand the revolutionary nature of the Christian gospel that transvalues our values.

That is what Jesus meant when he said that the “maimed, the blind, and the halt” would enter the Kingdom of heaven first. They know that life is broken and they reserve God’s mercy joyfully. But those of us who are secure in some form of philosophy, power, or political wisdom, do not think that life has to be broken. We do not think that the gospel is relevant to us. Part of the task of preaching the gospel, Niebuhr observes, is to convince people who think that the gospel is for the weak, that it is for the strong as well.

When William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, died, there was a great gathering at St. Paul’s Church in London to pay tribute to this remarkable man. The Queen of England was present along with a host of people from very meager circumstances. As the casket of William Booth was brought out the center aisle of the church, a woman in the back of the church – a street person really – cried out, “He cared for the likes of us.”

That certainly is the message of the book of Jonah. It is the story of a God who loves not only his own people but who loves all the people of the world. It is the story of a God who was not content to see a great city perish, but who loved even the enemy of his people Israel.

At the school where my daughter Lucy teaches English in Alexandria, Virginia, the teachers are encouraged to teach a course each year that they design themselves. Last year Lucy and another young teacher taught a course they entitled “The Literature of the Enemy.” It was a course that encouraged high school students to learn about the literature of the Iranians, the Palestinians, and the Iraqi cultures. The purpose, of course, was to help young people know a bit more about the world than just their small circle.

You see it is a lot easier to hate people about whom you know little than it is to hate people about whom you know something about their lives: their hopes, their dreams, struggles and joys.

Jesus once said to a crowd of people who came to him seeking a sign that he was the Messiah of God that there was no other sign for them than the “sign of Jonah.” Then Jesus observed that there was something present in his preaching that was greater than the sign of Jonah.

Jesus loved this little book of the Old Testament. He proclaimed and fulfilled. And in doing so he reminds us that the God we worship and serve is one who loves all the people of the world.

Amen!